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Review: Susan Watkins, *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), ix + 220 pages. ISBN: 978-1-137-48649-3. £109.99 hbk

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Susan Watkins is a leading expert in contemporary women's writing, who has published extensively on twentieth century and twenty-first century women writers. She has published *The History of British Women's Writing, 1945-1975* (co-edited with Clare Hanson, 2017), *Doris Lessing* (2011), *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* (with Alice Ridout, 2009) and *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists* (2001) as well as chapters, articles and conference papers on speculative fiction. Her latest monograph, *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction* (2020), is the first text published in the Palgrave 'Studies in Contemporary Women's Writing' series, which publishes research on contemporary women, transgender and non-binary writers from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The main argument that Watkins posits is that male-authored post-apocalyptic fiction tends to focus on 'men who are trying to survive, trying to protect women and trying to rebuild things the way they were before' (1) whereas contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction envisions ways to create the world anew after the apocalyptic event. Watkins claims that the desire to create change and imagine multiple possible futures in contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction is tied to gender as the female characters are desperate to escape their limited positions in a patriarchal society. This sharply contrasts with many male-authored post-apocalyptic novels which are infused with a nostalgic longing to recreate the past and reassert traditional gender roles. Her book convincingly demonstrates the need to analyse how contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction engages with and departs from traditional—often male authored—post-apocalyptic fiction through an intersectional feminist praxis, addressing how nationality, race and ethnicity intersect with gender and sexuality.

Throughout the book, Watkins mainly focuses on novels published from 2000 onwards in the UK and North America, whilst making references to many other novels from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and she also analyses a number of novels by North American writers of Afro-Caribbean heritage. She does note, however, that many novels by North American writers of East Asian heritage have recently emerged and she draws our attention to the fact that dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels have recently been published in Australasia and the Indian subcontinent. Further research into contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction beyond the UK and North America would enrich Watkins' argument. Having said this, this is the first monograph on contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction and it is understandable why Watkins chose to discuss widely-read, award-winning, popular novels in this genre from the early twenty-first century to the present day, by writers such as Margaret Atwood, Maggie Gee and Jeanette Winterson, which had not previously been examined through this lens.

In the introduction, Watkins prefaces her argument with an illuminating discussion regarding the relationship between the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres, making references to the connections between contemporary speculative fiction and twentieth-century classics. Watkins discusses the origins of both the dystopian and apocalyptic genres, demonstrating how contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction can be seen to borrow and update themes, images and motifs from writers such as Mary Shelley, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler. She is sceptical of Andrew Tate's suggestion, in his book *Apocalyptic Fiction* (2017), that novels can be separated into the categories of dystopian fiction or apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic fiction as she claims that many novels that she discusses are a hybrid of both genres. Watkins uses the example of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as this novel is often celebrated as a feminist dystopian classic but it is also a post-apocalyptic novel that envisions disease and pollution causing a drop in the fertility rate. Watkins also challenges Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan's categories of the 'classical dystopia' and the 'critical dystopia' outlined in their edited collection *Dark Horizons* (2003) wherein they state that classical dystopian texts often end unhappily with very little, if any, hope within the novel whereas critical dystopias show glimpses of hope within the novel and usually end on an ambiguous note. Again, Watkins is sceptical of these absolute definitions and implies that it is ultimately the reader who is responsible for engaging with the novel and deciding whether they want to envision an alternative future or restore the past. In this chapter, Watkins provides a comprehensive historical and cultural overview of the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres positioning contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction in this field whilst also indicating how it this writing is innovative.

In the second chapter, 'Science, Nature and Matter', Watkins examines Jane Rogers' *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011), Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007) in light of Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). She uses Barad's discussion of 'foetal agency' because women's reproductive freedoms are often controlled by the state in dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels and the needs of the foetus supersede the needs of the mother. In these novels, women are either seen as walking wombs and valuable resources who are required to repopulate the planet or they are forced to have contraceptive devices such as the IUD inserted in their bodies to combat overpopulation. The connections that Watkins makes between reproductive control and the act of writing through the prism of agency in these novels is deeply insightful. For example, Watkins reminds us to question the written consent that Jessie Lamb gives in Rogers' novel because it is not always clear in dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels whether the testimonies are

given freely or if they are truthful. The use of language and the act of testimony are recurring tropes in the dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels and these tropes remind readers of the importance of the humanities and critical thinking in stories that centre on science and technology.

The following chapter, 'The Posthuman Body' explores the relationship between humans and machines and the relationship between humans and animals by engaging with Donna Haraway's theories of the cyborg and animals as companion species. In this chapter, Watkins examines Tama Janowitz's *They Is Us* (2008), Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), Nnedi Okorafor's *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and Atwood's novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *MaddAddam* (2013) and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015). Through her reading of these novels, Watkins concludes:

Those fictions which are capable of pushing the posthuman body to recognise its alignment with the animal and the machine are also those that are able to move beyond the dystopian genre into a genuinely new space of post-apocalyptic writing, in which conventions of embodied selfhood can be questioned. (94)

One of the most striking examples which exemplifies Watkins' depiction of the contrasting attitudes towards the posthuman body is the comparison of the depiction of the posthuman body in Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy and *The Heart Goes Last*. The depiction of interspecies cooperation and harmony at the end of the *MaddAddam* trilogy sharply contrasts with the disturbing image of the human as a cyborg controlled 'by the machine' in *The Heart Goes Last*. Although the comparison between the cyborg figure (human and machine) and the companion species theory (human and animal) is thought-provoking, discussing these theories in separate chapters may offer different insights. For example, the relationship between human and animals involves separate issues to the relationship between human and machines—such as capitalism and the division of labour as Watkins notes with *The Heart Goes Last*—and vice versa.

The fourth chapter, 'The Maternal Imaginary' examines the mother-daughter relationship and women's interactions with each other in Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998), Julie Myerson's *Then* (2011), Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017). Watkins uses Luce Irigaray's essay 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' (1991) and discusses the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in feminist theory. She notes that the father-son relationship is at the heart of many male-authored post-apocalyptic narratives which are imbued with a nostalgic longing to return to the (patriarchal) world before the apocalypse and which reassert traditional gender roles. Whilst describing the maternal imaginary in

contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction in a positive light, Watkins also warns us that there is a risk that this is 'merely the mirror image of the paternal narrative rather than something that is truly different' (126). Lauren Beukes' post-apocalyptic novel *Afterland* (2020) focuses on the mother-son relationship and Maggie Shen King's short story 'Heihaizi' (2017)—a companion story to her dystopian novel *An Excess Male* (2017)—is set in China during the one-child policy years and focuses on the relationship between a mother and her daughter and son, who is given the *hukou* (household registration) instead of his sister who is a non-citizen. These two examples indicate that contemporary women writers of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction are conscious of the mother-daughter relationship becoming reductive, like the father-son relationship has arguably become, as Watkins indicates. These examples suggest that there is a departure emerging from the mother-daughter and father-son relationship in SF.

In the fifth chapter, 'Time, Narrative and History', Watkins examines Nalo Hopkins' *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann* (1999) and *General Dann* (2005), Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004), Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy and Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009). Watkins uses Elizabeth Grosz's concept of the rupture or 'nick' and Haraway's concept of the Chthulucene to discuss the relationship between gender, time, narrative and history. Watkins suggests that contemporary women writers in this genre use the device of the sequel to 'generate a state of suspension proliferation or unfinished process that functions as a characteristically imaginative questioning of conventional conceptions of time, narrative and history' (136). She argues that 'chronology or temporality is also inevitably linked to perspective' (149) and notes that Atwood tells the same story in her *MaddAddam* trilogy from different viewpoints in the sequels. Many contemporary dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives are now written from multiple viewpoints and have multiple narrators and protagonists. This is important because classic examples in these genres such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *The Handmaid's Tale* are written from one perspective and this increases the protagonist's sense of isolation and hopelessness. Having multiple protagonists who are connected to each other and can form a resistance, for example in *The Testaments* (2019)—the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*—and in the Hulu Television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2016-) gives the reader/viewer a sense of hope, community and shared purpose. Watkins's suggestion that the sequel in contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction adds a hopeful, utopian element is compelling and persuasive.

The final chapter, 'Literature and the Word', focuses on words, texts and narratives that have survived the apocalypse: Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles: A Family 2029-2047*

(2016), Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010), Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) as well as *General Dann* and *MaddAddam*. Watkins argues that contemporary women writers in the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres not only revise themes, images and tropes from these genres but the motif of revision 'becomes important as a way of explaining how and in what forms literature can persist after the apocalypse' (174). The motif of revision is not only important to the content of the novel or as a literary device but revision is also important to the structure of contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction. This is because, as Watkins indicates in the previous chapter, that the sequel is a mode of revision and disruption rather than a continuation, in contrast to the function of the sequel in other genres. Watkins also implies that rewriting is a key feature of contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction in stating that the palimpsest is a key concept. She confidently presents the case that contemporary post-apocalyptic novels portray a positive future for literature after the apocalypse but, as with everything else, literature undergoes a process of revision.

Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction is a well-researched, astute and exciting intervention in both contemporary women's writing and SF scholarship. Throughout the book, Watkins engages with many theorists in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic studies such as James Berger, Claire Curtis, Heather J. Hicks, Elizabeth K. Rosen, Andrew Tate and Slavoj Žižek. She also deftly interweaves feminist theory and posthuman theory in her discussions of the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres. Moreover, Watkins' book is a masterclass in how to write an interdisciplinary academic text that is both engaging and easy to follow. I have no doubt that scholars researching contemporary women's writing, feminist theory, posthumanism, SF or twenty-first century fiction, will benefit greatly from reading Watkins' monograph.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

